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After Daniloff

Nick Daniloff is out, Gennadi Zakharov is on his way back to KGB headquarters. Soviet dissident and torture victim Yuri Orlov is going to the West, and in 10 days Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev will be chatting in Reykjavik.

While Messrs. Reagan, Shultz and Shevardnadze seemed in high spirits yesterday over their surprise announcement of the minisummit in Iceland, many Americans may have trouble spanning the logic that lets us pass so quickly from the grim lessons of the Daniloff affair to the high hopes of an arms agreement. At the least, Mr. Reagan is asking the American public to make a large leap of faith with him now toward doing business with a country that regards U.S. citizens as merely flesh to barter. Foreign Minister Shevardnadze was direct on this point yesterday. The "events of recent weeks" weren't an obstacle to peace, Mr. Shevardnadze said, "but the real deadlock was the issue of nuclear and space arms."

Many American commentators have similarly suggested that the dreadful Daniloff affair shouldn't be allowed to impede a deal with the Soviets' arms negotiators. To the contrary, we believe that the Daniloff affair is quite pertinent to the larger arms issue. It raises again fundamental questions about the political and moral integrity of the Soviet system.

We had thought that the public's skepticism about the utility of past arms agreements had been expressed in two overwhelming presidential votes for a candidate whose own deep skepticism was public, continuous and unapologetic. It appears that Mr. Reagan's skepticism has lessened.

By what logic is the Daniloff affair a pretext for hope? The U.S. protected its interests by arresting a Soviet spy,

and the Russians shoved an American journalist into prison. As a public-relations cover for this preposterous act, the Soviets release Yuri Orlov, who was imprisoned and tortured for publicly demanding that the Politburo comply with its signed commitment to the Helsinki accords on human rights. The other, utterly innocent Soviet inmates mentioned during the negotiations—such as ailing biochemist David Goldfarb—revert to status as negotiating chips for another time. In return for dealing, the Soviets have gotten the Americans to freeze last week's announced expulsion of 25 Soviet U.N. spies at 11 departures, leaving the remaining 14 in place, subject to negotiation. Our intelligence sources report that these 14 are among the Soviets' most valued agents in the U.S.

With Mr. Daniloff's detention widely viewed as thwarting a summit meeting, Mr. Gorbachev played his trump card. He proposed a minisummit on a neutral site, saving him from the prospect of being overmatched in a U.S.-based summit. With a stroke, Mr. Gorbachev has driven the Daniloff story off the front pages, replacing it with his own summit agenda.

Very well, let us press further into this never-never land. When Mr. Reagan sits down in Reykjavik, there is one issue he should raise immediately with General-Secretary Gorbachev. Mr. Reagan should say that while the residents of Montana and South Dakota no doubt worry about the ICBM silos they've lived with for 30 years, what they really want their president to find out is why the Soviets are walking away from an agreement to buy 8.5 million metric tons of American grain. If there is to be a summit, let us at least discuss realities.